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The History of Folklore and the History of Science

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The History of Folklore and the History of Science

Abstract

We have to recognize a very important methodological problem that is involved in the study of the history of folklore. By turning to the history of the discipline as a subject of research we embark into a different discipline, namely history of science, and thus assume new responsibilities. As a matter of fact, at present the history of science is a recognized discipline with its departments, books and textbooks, journals and national and international conventions that provide the framework for scholarly exchange. At the University of Pennsylvania we have a department, History and Sociology of Science, devoted precisely to this subject matter.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Near and Middle Eastern Studies
| Oral History

Do we take an interest in work which was "ahead of its time," even if it was soon forgotten and led to nothing, but merely prefigured later developments? Should folklorists themselves study the history of folkloristics or should they leave the task to historians of the social sciences, trained in their own methodology and probably more aware of the larger historical picture than we? Finally, there is the role studies of the past might play in graduate folklore education to be considered. Is a systematic study of folkloristic history integral to effective graduate training in folklore, or might the graduate student best put his time and energies elsewhere and pick up his history "indirectly" while he reads broadly in genre or area-related courses? At Indiana I picked up my history via the "indirect" method, while at Texas the basic graduate course (which I once taught) consists of a historical survey of various approaches to the study of folklore. Which was preferable?

The questions are many and the remarks that follow are not offered as final answers to all of them, but as thoughtful commentaries upon some. Perhaps they will stimulate further thought and discussion.

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THE HISTORY OF FOLKLORE AND THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

We have to recognize a very important methodological problem that is involved in the study of the history of folklore. By turning to the history of the discipline as a subject of research we embark into a different discipline, namely history of science, and thus assume new responsibilities. As a matter of fact, at present the history of science is a recognized discipline with its departments, books and textbooks, journals and national and international conventions that provide the framework for scholarly exchange. At the University of Pennsylvania we have a department, History and Sociology of Science, devoted precisely to this subject matter. Hence, when we study the history of our discipline, we have at the same time to address ourselves not just to folklore and folklorists, but also to the students of the history of science, particularly the social sciences. Very often the students of the history of science offer us methods by which we can examine our own history. Hence, it is essential in the study of the history of folklore that we are aware of the issues and the theoretical and methodological problems that are involved in the study of the history of science in general, that we do not just

address ourselves alone, but also make the study of the history of our discipline relevant to the research in the history of social science (and to humanistic research in general).

For that purpose it is necessary for us to ask three types of questions regarding the history of folklore. First, we have to examine the cultural notions that underlie the research in the discipline in a particular period, in a particular country; secondly, we have to reconstruct the social paradigm of research; thirdly, we have to understand the disciplinary premises that served as the basis for the study of folklore.

The history of folklore studies in Russia differs from the history of folklore studies in England, not just because different personalities and culturally distinct types of folklore are involved, but also because, in each country, the study of folklore developed on the basis of distinct cultural and philosophical ideas that are prevalent in these respective cultures. Bob Scholte has examined this question in an article in the *American Anthropologist*.¹ He compared the theories of Levi-Strauss with those of Radcliffe-Browne and suggests that the differences are culturally rooted and are not merely a matter of scientific theories. There are, according to Scholte, two paradigms: one of French anthropology, the other of British anthropology. Also, the usage of words and concepts in the respective languages, English and French, has an effect upon this situation. Often we complain that we don't understand Levi-Strauss, but in French he sounds good. This reminds me of a joke-telling situation in Israeli society. When a person tells a joke and gets no response, he excuses himself: "In Yiddish it sounds better."

Secondly, we have to examine the social paradigm of a particular discipline. Dick Dorson's study of the British folklorists is devoted partially to this subject. He notes the social relationships between the groups that constituted the folklorists in England: when did they meet, how did they communicate with each other, what was the nature of their relationships, hostile or amicable? This dimension of the scientific community can partially explain, historically, the emergence of a particular theory or the concern with a certain subject matter. In the study of the social paradigm of folklore, and science in general, we can use models of the sociology of language or communication. The network and contexts of social

¹Bob Scholte, "Epistemic Paradigms: Some Problems in Cross-cultural Research on Social Anthropological History and Theory," *American Anthropologist*, 68 (1966), 1192-1201.

relationship in a discipline are subjects that no historian of folklore can ignore. Just who, in a particular period, related to whom and under what circumstances? What was the nature of their relationship? Who were the students of whom? And how did the students relate to their teachers? All these are important questions that would enable us to reconstruct the social paradigm of our discipline in a particular period.

Yet, the previous two questions are but auxiliaries to the main subject of the study of a history of folklore as a science, namely, the examination of the paradigm of folklore as a discipline. This third aspect requires the examination of the theoretical premises that underlay research and the methodological principles that were available and accepted in a particular period and country. There is no use in criticizing today Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and James Frazer; such criticism is often trivial. We rehashed their mistakes over and over again in our introduction to folklore courses. But it is extremely important for the history of the discipline to understand why they thought the way they did, what were the general aims of their folkloristic inquiry, what did they hope to find about Man and his Culture or about a particular national tradition. How did they go about making their discoveries? What was for them a legitimate research procedure? All these questions that pertain to the dynamics of scholarship and the thoughts that dominate a discipline are the core of the inquiry into our own history.

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META-FOLKLORISTICS AND THE HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE

Folkloristics is a scholarly meta-language whose object language is folklore; meta-folklore, native exegesis, is from one point of view another object language of folkloristics and from another something of a native parallel of folkloristics. Meta-folkloristics is that language whose object language is folkloristics. It includes but is not limited to the valuable biography and bibliography phase of disciplinary historiography. Establishing chronology constitutes only the first step in writing the history of a discipline.

Meta-folkloristics takes as its data both the chronology presented in first-level investigations and the reports of that chronology, e.g., Dorson's *The British Folklorists*. Every book review, every critical analysis and reinterpretation of earlier scholarship, is part of the data of meta-folkloristics. It is a commonplace that studies of history and studies of historiographers'

What a jerk! How about speaking English?